

Republican Guard forces to the north and the Fedeyeen opposition to the Division's effort along Highway 1. The Division would not hunker down and offer a target for the paramilitaries, it would stay on the hunt.

TF Inchon Sustains the Momentum

The lessons learned in An Nasiriyah resulted in the tactics that the Inchon Marines would invoke for the remainder of the fight to Al Kut. To counter the urban ambushes used by the paramilitary forces, RCT-1 employed the 'strongpoint tactics' proven in An Nasiriyah to pass the RCT through, thus continuing the momentum all the way up Route 7. Any area that fit the template for a Fedeyeen ambush was attacked with a robust force of armor, mechanized infantry, or light armored vehicles. Once this area was secure, the attacking infantry would remain in position as a guard force, allowing the remainder of the RCT to quickly pass through unimpeded.

On 26 March, using the strong point concept, 2^d LAR and a platoon from Alpha company, 1st Tank Battalion continued their movement north in advance of the RCT. The RCT's mechanized infantry followed in trace, with 1/4 reinforced by Alpha tanks as the designated strongpoint force for the city of Ash Shattrah. This town had been a hotbed of Regime activity in the past days, and was expected to provide a challenge. The enemy had adjusted his own tactics, and now allowed the LAVs and Tanks to pass before opening up on the softer vehicles to the rear. Captain Paul Gomez's Bravo Company and a platoon from Alpha tanks picketed along the route. Captain Brian Collins' Charlie Company and Captain Dave Banning's Alpha Tanks headquarters

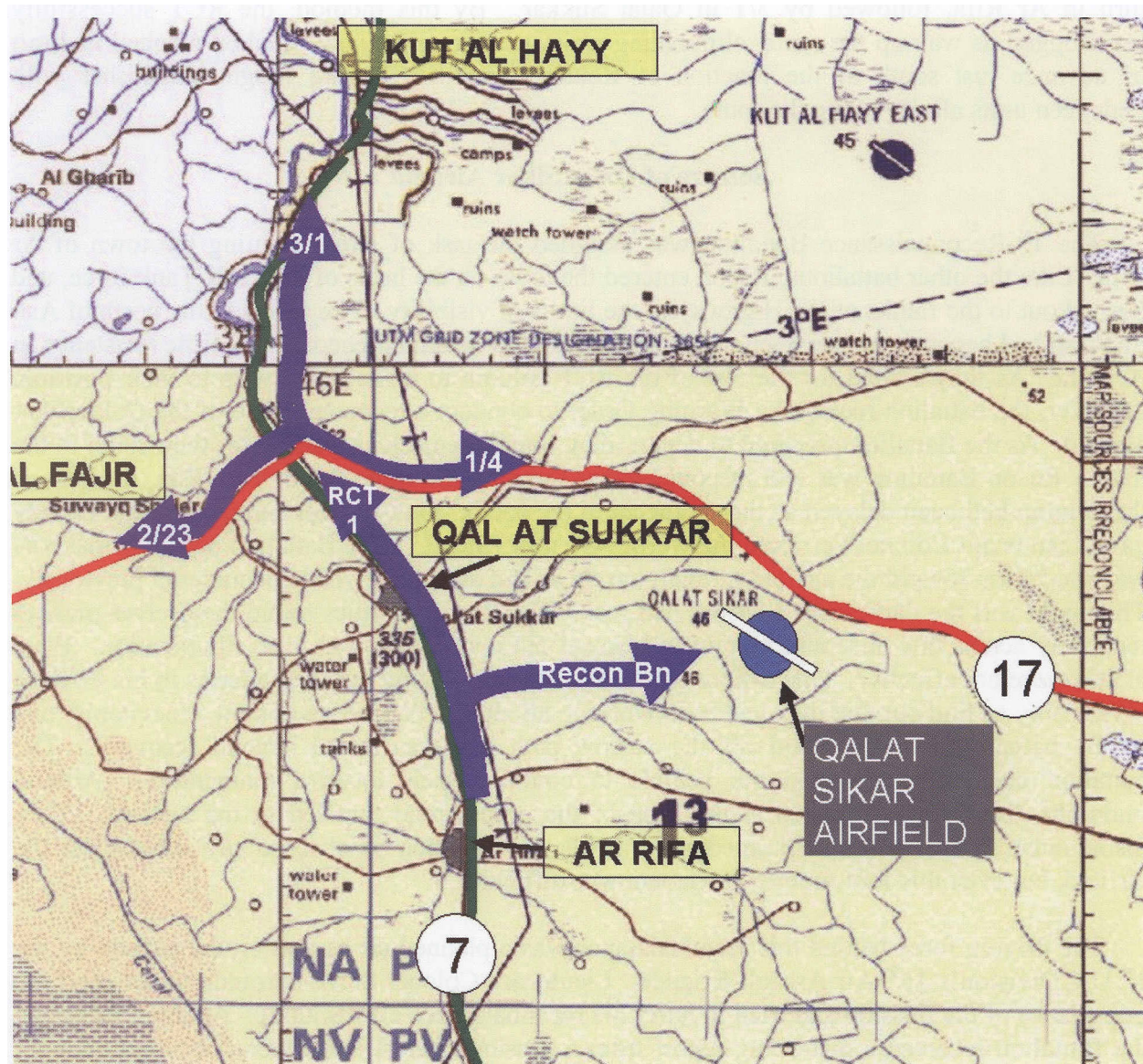


Convoys often had to compete with local shepherds and their flocks for road space.

section blocked the town proper. Captain Griffin's Alpha Company and a platoon from Alpha tanks guarded the approaches to the town from the south. As 1/4 entered Ash Shattrah they immediately began taking fire. The battalion moved to suppress the enemy fires, and quickly gained control of the situation. The battalion's forward command group drew small arms fire and several RPGs from paramilitary fighters located in the built up area. The battalion's assistant operations chief, Gunnery Sergeant Andre Askew, led the supply Marines, cooks, and scout sniper team that comprised the command group's security detail in quickly silencing the regime

loyalists. Every Marine was a rifleman. As Alpha Company was eliminating final pockets of resistance, the ADC, General Kelly, approached the company commander and asked for an update to the situation. Captain Griffin stated that all enemy positions had been effectively suppressed with the exception of the southernmost building from which the company was

receiving sporadic sniper fire. “Well, we can’t let that hold up the entire regiment. What are we going to do about it?” inquired the general. Only moments before, the company commander had directed the assault section to employ a thermobaric rocket to silence the sniper. “Sir, if you wait just a minute, you’ll see a thermobaric rocket shot that should eliminate the problem,” the company commander replied. Seconds later, a devastating explosion rocked the target building, blowing large pieces of concrete in the air. It was a spectacular display from the first employment of a thermobaric round during the war. No further resistance came from the building.



Inchon maintains the momentum, pushing north and branching out along Highway 7.

During this encounter, the Marines also observed the enemy fighters using ‘human shields’. The Baghdad Fedeyeen would grab local women and children, and force them to stand between the Marines and themselves. The superb fire discipline and tactical skill of 1/4 allowed them to

destroy the enemy fighters, while causing no known casualties among the innocent civilians. First Battalion, 4th Marines had one of the highest percentages of recent Boot Camp graduates in the Division, and their actions were a testimonial to the skill and discipline of these young Marines. They held the door open for the rest of the RCT, and took their place at the end of the column once the rest had safely passed.

RCT-1 continued to use strongpoint tactics to clear Highway 7, and began to refer to their progress as the '100-mile running gunfight'. At the town of An Nasr, 2/23 held the door open while engaging enemy mortars and RPGs in the town. The Reconnaissance Battalion took its turn in Ar Rifa, followed by 3/1 in Qalat Sukkar. By this method, the RCT successfully leapfrogged its way up the route, eliminating resistance along the way. Inchon reached its limit of advance just south of the junction of Routes 7 and 17, having fought skirmishes with Fedeyeen units all day along the route.

Seizure of Qalat Sikar Airfield

The 1st Reconnaissance Battalion was assigned the task of strongpointing the town of Ar Rifa. Like the other battalions, Recon entered the town on the heels of the LAR/Tank force, and pushed out to the flanks of the Highway to the limits of visibility. The towns to the north of Ash Shattrah had become progressively more benign, and the battalion encountered little resistance in Ar Rifa. As they waited for the rest of the RCT column to make its way up to their position, however, the battalion received a Warning Order to conduct a reconnaissance of the Qalat Sikar airfield. As the Battalion prepared to depart, they found themselves waiting for their relief in the town. Recon Battalion was still responsible for securing the route through Ar Rifa, but part of the column had been delayed as they refueled to the south. Finally, near sunset, Colonel Dowdy gave Lieutenant Colonel Ferrando the word: "Go now, Steve." The Battalion began to make its way the 25 km toward the airfield through terrain as bad as any they had encountered previously. This night was the darkest the Marines had seen. The Recon Marines found themselves picking their way across this miserable terrain in blacked out conditions, with zero illumination. Even NVGs were not effective. One officer recalls his driver changing out the batteries in his PVS-14 NVGs only to find out that they had been working all along. Progress was slow. Inevitably, one of the battalion's vehicles slid off the narrow path and was mired beyond recovery. The battalion decided to abandon the vehicle to continue their forward momentum. Around midnight, the battalion arrived at the base of the access road that led to the airfield. They dismounted several teams to immediately move to a position to observe any activity on the airfield, but even this foot-mobile movement was difficult.

The driving force behind this reconnaissance was a planned air assault on the airfield by the 1st UK Division's 16th Air Assault Brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Steve Ferrando understood the importance of the mission and tried to hurry his reconnaissance efforts along. At about this time, the Battalion received a disturbing report from a passing aircraft that several armored vehicles had been spotted on the airfield. This complicated the problem significantly. Pressed by the terrain, a potential change to the enemy situation, and time pressure to get this mission accomplished, Lieutenant Colonel Ferrando was in a tight spot indeed. Only one thing could add to the pressure now. The Iridium phone rang. It was Chaos. "Steve, I've really got to know what's on that airfield. We want to support our UK allies here, and we really need this," the CG

said. Sensing the urgency of providing this critical reconnaissance in support of the Division's Coalition allies, Lieutenant Colonel Ferrando huddled his Alpha and Bravo Company commanders and they crafted a plan. They would have to take a higher degree of risk to accomplish this mission. They would assault the airfield with two companies, using speed and surprise to cover their assault. After a tense two hours of waiting for dawn to break, the two companies attacked online onto the airfield, finding it deserted. The Recon Battalion spent the next two days securing the airfield and blocking Highway 17 to the east, protecting the flank of the Division from any sortie the 10th Armor Division might decide to make. As fate would have it, the UK air assault never took place, as the 16th Air Assault Brigade was assigned to another mission.

27 March Demonstration to Hantush



The cloverleaf intersection of Highways 1 and 17 was key terrain, and fought over repeatedly during the campaign.



Artillery fires on Fedeyeen positions as Marines approach the Hantush airstrip.

At 0321Z, 27 March, RCT-5 resumed the attack up Route 1 as the Division's main effort with a mission to seize Hantush Airstrip. Confronting irregular enemy forces along the route, 2/5 engaged and destroyed an enemy company-sized unit with armor and mechanized vehicles on the objective. The enemy used scores of RPGs, mortars and heavy machine guns. Supporting the attack, 11th Marines had three battalions along Highway 1 in support of the Division's attack, and provided a crushing fires capability. RCT-5 seized the Hantush Airstrip at 0620Z, following a brief but potent firefight. During this action, Gunnery Sergeant Joseph Menusa of the 1st Combat Engineer Battalion was killed by enemy fire. As his engineer platoon was attacking up Highway 1 to seize the Hantush Airstrip (supporting 2/5), it was subjected to machinegun fire and attacked by RPGs. Aware of the danger, Gunnery Sergeant Menusa chose to replace a junior Marine in an exposed security position atop his AAV. In doing so, he gave the Marine needed relief and put himself in a better position to observe and help control his platoon. Shortly after, Gunnery Sergeant Menusa's AAV and the two M9 Armored Combat Excavators behind him came under withering small arms fire. More concerned with the mission and his Marines than for his own safety, Gunnery Sergeant Menusa chose to stay on top of his vehicle to direct the suppressive fires of his

Marines, protecting the unarmed bulldozers behind him. While in this exposed position, he was mortally wounded. Because of the training and mentorship he had provided, the Marines of his platoon were able to quickly collect themselves after this devastating loss and continue on to accomplish the mission of seizing Hantush Airstrip.



Marines advanced on Hantush with Cobra escorts. Cobras provided both CAS and intelligence on enemy threats up the road.



Third Battalion, 5th Marines holds the door open at the Hantush cloverleaf as the Division takes Hwy 27.

While 2/5 was seizing the Hantush Airstrip, 3/5 had the task of holding the door open at the 'cloverleaf', an interchange at the junction of Highways 1 and 17 just to the east of Ad Diwaniyah. The Fedeyeen continued to be concentrated in the Ad Diwaniyah area, and the Division's movement to the north had drawn several hundred of them out of the city to positions from which they could interdict the Marines' movement. Lieutenant Colonel Mark Toal, the regimental Operations Officer, recounts that while 2/5 was pushing north, 3/5 was in 'one hell of a fight' at the cloverleaf.

While watching 2/5 and the other lead elements of RCT-5 push toward Hantush Airstrip, 3/5 observed several small bands of enemy soldiers approaching from Ad Diwaniyah. These soldiers were taken under fire by Lima Company and its attached CAAT section. Tanks from the attached tank platoon moved forward from the cloverleaf toward Ad Diwaniyah and destroyed two T-62 tanks located in deep revetments. Concurrently, Kilo Company, back at the original defensive position providing security for the Battalion's Main CP and field trains, saw two BMPs and a pair of anti-aircraft guns located approximately 2 km to the

west. The Company Fire Support Team (FiST) quickly worked up a combined arms package of artillery and close air support to destroy the equipment. This package did the job, as Marines throughout the battalion witnessed the secondary explosions that erupted after the air strike.

Soon afterward, however, the Battalion CP, field trains, and Kilo Company began receiving accurate enemy mortar fire. The rear elements of 3/5 quickly moved forward, out of the

incoming fire, using Kilo Company as convoy security. Nearing the cloverleaf, Kilo tripped another ambush when a bypassed company-sized unit opened up with a high volume of direct fire on the AAVs. Quickly dismounting, Kilo Marines moved into the assault, returning fire and killing several Iraqi soldiers. As large numbers of Iraqis retreated into a series of mud huts and houses nearby, Captain Mike Miller pulled his men back and began to rock each target with a steady combination of rotary and fixed wing aviation. The battalion cleared at least 100 enemy troops in the trench lines lining both sides of the road, utilizing both air and surface fire missions to attack and defeat the enemy. The actions at the cloverleaf would continue for most of the day.



Iraqi life goes on as Marines advance along Highway 1. Many of the civilians in the south showed little concern for the war occurring around them.

At 0900Z, the Division received the order to abandon Hantush and withdraw to the south. RCT-5 began to withdraw back to more defensible terrain in the vicinity of the Ad Diwaniyah crossroads. After the terrible weather, the tragic loss of life along the way, and now the successful attack and gain of positive momentum, this ordered withdrawal was a hard pill to swallow for many of the Marines. The Division had its sights set on Baghdad, and any delay in getting there was not suffered gladly. The Marines from RCT-5 had a proud legacy from World War I and the actions of their forefathers in Belleau Wood, and the withdrawal drew many comments of the 'Retreat hell, we just got here' variety.

Later in the day, after the Division had pulled back to the vicinity of the Cloverleaf, the situation was clarified for the Division Marines. After the attack had been launched, the CFLCC and MEF Commanders had notified the Division that the main effort had shifted to establishing a better security environment in the rear prior to resuming the attack. The Division's rapid advance had knocked the enemy off-balance, but had left its own re-supply routes vulnerable as



Cobras provide supporting fires near the cloverleaf.

long as the An Nasiriyah and Al Basrah urban areas still harbored significant enemy forces. The additional battlespace taken by the move on Hantush was considered an untenable position should the Iraqis counterattack, and the Division had been ordered to withdraw back to the Diwaniyah area. During planning, the Division and CSSG had foreseen and accepted the risks to extended supply lines, but the Division was now ordered to reduce the risk by tactical action. The Division had a philosophy regarding orders from higher

headquarters: 'Just Do It.' The Division completed its withdrawal and resumed its aggressive hunt for remaining Regime paramilitaries in zone.

After the misery of the last three days, the sun emerged with clear skies on the 27th. The Marines were excited about the opportunity to be back in the offensive, and you could feel it. The Division Forward had joined the column in trace of RCT-5. There was sporadic resistance from defenders firing from defensive prepared positions and bunkers alongside the highway. Ahead of us there was a lot of air and artillery being called against targets in a cement plant and a chicken farm. The lead elements of the convoy scattered these guys, and as we passed, the citizens of the local area had taken to the streets and were waving to us. North of Diwaniyah, the terrain began to look more like what I thought Iraq would look like. Water buffalo grazed in muddy pools at the base of Palm groves. Green fields surrounded small mud-brick villages that could have been drawn from a history book. Boys and women herded cattle, sheep, and goats alongside the roads. But the terrain was terrible. There was mud and standing water everywhere, and cross-country mobility was next to nothing. We were pretty fired-up when the airfield was secured, but then we started to see vehicles coming back the other way. While we sat along side the road, we watched in disbelief as the whole attack force came rumbling back south. When the entire tank battalion and an infantry battalion were observed heading south, we knew something was up. It was frustrating as hell to see that dominating combat force turning around and running back south. I was afraid we were losing our advantages of momentum and surprise.

- Captain Steve Dunn III

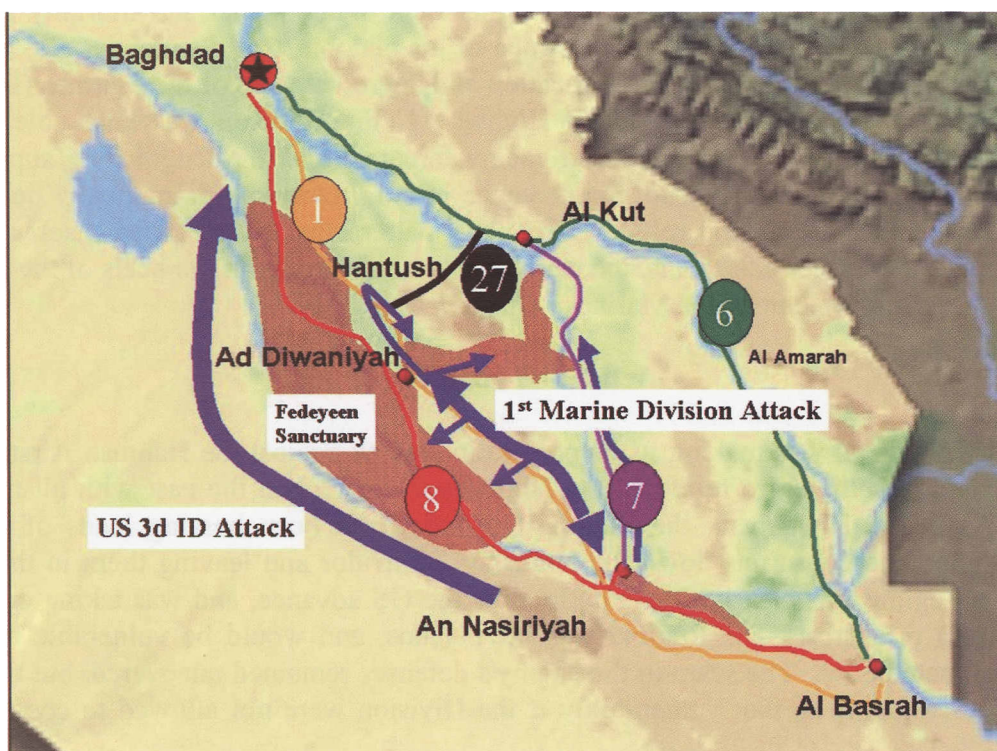
Actions in Ad Diwaniyah

The Fedeyeen presence in Ad Diwaniyah was reportedly extensive. The local people reported that these Regime enforcers were brought down from Baghdad and were allegedly terrorizing the populace, running around in their black pajamas and hoods through the streets of the town. Because of its central location, and the fact that American forces had not yet cleared it, Ad Diwaniyah became a transit point for Regime fighters brought in from elsewhere. The fighters that were bussed or trucked into town included Fedeyeen, deserters threatened back into service, conscripts, and foreigners. Allegedly, there was a cadre of Republican Guard officers who were organizing, training, and equipping these forces as they arrived in town, then sending them out for missions against the US Army to the west, or the US Marines to the east. The local populace was terrified of these fighters, and wanted them to go away. The civilians were, of course, powerless to do anything about it.

Now, it was 1st Marine Division's turn to deal with these thugs. The Division had been operating to the east of Ad Diwaniyah for several days. By the time the attack elements of RCT-5 had made their way back to the Cloverleaf just outside of town, 3/5 was busily engaged with Fedeyeen fighters on both sides of the highway. They had been fighting most of the day, and were coordinating fixed wing and rotary wing support as the columns went by. Using (by now) standard enemy tactics, the paramilitary fighters would wave white flags and signal surrender whenever helicopters appeared overhead, then would pull them down and resume firing as soon

as the helicopters went off-station. The battalion kept the heat on the enemy, however, and destroyed several hundred Fedeyeen fighters over the course of the day.

Putting fires on the Fedeyeen in Ad Diwaniyah proved to be an exercise in patience, as again the seam between the Army and the Marine Corps had to be traversed. One example of the staff gymnastics that were required happened later that day. In the morning, Lieutenant Nate Boaz, and his HUMINT Exploitation Team Three (HET 3) were working with the local populace near Ad Diwaniyah in support of RCT-5. The team was advised by a fearful local citizen that the Fedeyeen had been using the Ad Diwaniyah stadium as their rally point, and that there were hundreds of fighters at this location at any given time. This information was reported up to the G-2, who quickly vectored the Pioneer from VMU-2 over the site, confirming the reported activity. Since this was not in the Division's battlespace, the request for fires on the target went to I MEF. I MEF coordinated with the CFLCC, and passed the target over to V Corps for prosecution. The Army then flew their own Hunter UAV over the stadium and confirmed the validity of the target before turning it over to joint air for prosecution. The Air Force then attacked the target, reportedly killing dozens of Fedeyeen and destroying some anti-aircraft guns in the process. Such a process was painfully slow, and effective only against large stationary targets such as a troop concentration in a stadium. Fortunately, these cross-service, cross-boundary engagements were rare.



'Throwing elbows' along the Highway 1 corridor. First Marine Division maintained momentum by destroying pockets of Fedeyeen fighters remaining in the vicinity of Highway 1 while the 3d US Infantry Division continued to move to the west.

The destruction of the Fedeyeen rallying point, and the continuous fires brought to bear against any identified troop concentrations by the Division took a toll on the Regime

organization in Ad Diwaniyah. The Division was not quite done with this town, however, and revisited the city with the Pioneer that night. The operators discovered a large equipment storage and repair facility housing dozens of T-55 tanks and self-propelled artillery pieces. Observing and adjusting fires with the Pioneer, the Division again demonstrated the powerful effects that could be achieved with an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle under the direct control of a Division targeteer. This had only been possible because of the superb supporting relationship the VMU squadrons had established with the Division. Because they had been placed in direct support, there was no intervening bureaucracy between the supported intelligence section and the crew operating the UAV. Both VMU-1 and VMU-2 aggressively attacked their mission, providing responsive support to the Division throughout the campaign. The VMU commanders and staff could frequently be found inside the Division CP, ensuring the effectiveness of their support. The tanks were destroyed, the concept of a directly supporting/organic UAV within the Division was proven, and the Iraqis paid the bill.

The time spent on hunter-killer operations along Highway 1 and in Ad Diwaniyah would pay off handsomely in the days and weeks ahead, but was not without cost. On 27 March, Lance Corporal Suarez del Solar, an infantryman with 1st LAR Battalion, was killed during a foot patrol conducted to find and eliminate the threat posed by remaining Fedeyeen fighters. As dusk approached, his squad was assigned the task of conducting a reconnaissance patrol in front of the screen line established by the LAVs of his platoon. Within a few minutes of beginning the patrol, an enemy mine detonated, rocking the members of the squad and mortally wounding Lance Corporal Suarez del Solar. The corpsmen of his platoon rushed to render aid, but it was too late to save his life. Because of the dedication and aggressiveness of the Marines (like Lance Corporal Suarez del Solar) clearing along Highway 1, the Division was later able to move against Baghdad with significantly reduced enemy threat against the lengthening supply lines. Over the next several days, the Fedeyeen presence in Ad Diwaniyah dramatically declined, as they were no longer able to find refuge there. In a pattern that would repeat itself across the newly liberated Iraqi cities and towns, the people took to the streets on the heels of the retreating Regime fighters, and welcomed the Marines with smiles and waves.

Actions on Highway 7

While the Division was making its demonstration attack against the Hantush Airstrip in the west, the enemy continued to reinforce the Highway 7 corridor in the east with all manner of fighters. As in Ad Diwaniyah, the Regime had reportedly been bussing loads of deserters, foreign fighters, and conscripts down the Highway 7 corridor and leaving them in the smaller towns. The Regime was clearly desperate to slow the US advance, and was taking extreme (if uncoordinated) measures. The Regime was off balance, and would be vulnerable to a rapid attack if conducted now. The seam in the enemy's defenses remained uncovered, but the enemy was bound to wake up to that vulnerability if the Division were not allowed to continue their attack soon.

RCT-1 Marines went into motion, with the mission of clearing Highway 17 near the junction with Highway 7, and continuing the pressure to the north. Second Battalion, 23^d Marines (2/23) pushed a small distance west on Route 17, while 1/4 cleared to the east towards 1st Recon



Marines of RCT-1 provide cover for forces advancing on Highway 7.

Battalion at Qalat Sikar Airfield. The 'Thundering Third' of 3/1, supported by 2^d LAR, attacked north to draw the attention of the Baghdad RG Division.

Later that night, a US Air Force tank-killing A-10 errantly attacked RCT-1's Alpha Command group. The pilot had received the mission request and grid coordinates from RCT-5 Marines engaged in an intense fight. Unfortunately, somewhere in the process, an error crept in to the fire mission coordinates. The grid zone designator passed to the pilot was off by one character. That one letter difference equated to 100 kilometers on the ground, and the A-10 subsequently

rolled in on what appeared to him to be the enemy. The A-10 pilot strafed RCT-1 with his 30 mm tank-killing gun and returned for another attack with high explosive bombs. The unit that requested the air support was engaged in fighting exactly 100 kilometers directly to the west. Alpha Command was at the exact grid location of the requested air support, but one grid zone designator further to the east. The aircraft was successfully called off before any Marines were injured. Shaken and considerably stirred by the A-10's actions, RCT-1's Alpha Command pressed on with their attack.

This type of friendly fire incident was rare. The Marines of RCT-1 were no strangers to some awesome, on target, rotary wing air support throughout the campaign. The 'Stingers' from HMLA-267 provided superb rotary wing air support around the clock. The Marines of the RCT also noted the support of the 'Purple Foxes' of HMM-364 with considerable enthusiasm. At no time did a battle casualty from RCT-1 die while awaiting evacuation due to their rapid response times and willingness to go into harm's way to help their fellow Marines. This squadron (with one of the greatest mottos in the Marine Corps) proved themselves repeatedly.

Shaping The Al Kut Battlefield

In a final action of 27 March, the Al Kut defenders received some shaping of their own by air fires. Although the pause in the attack along Highway 1 had given the enemy a respite on the ground, this was offset by an increase in air shaping fires, permitting the MEF to remain on the offensive and to turn the heat up on the enemy. Because of the rapid execution and uncertain timing of the initial attacks into Iraq, there had been only limited shaping fires. Bad weather had interfered with flight operations and targeting in subsequent days during the storm. Now, the skies opened up and aviation assets from across the Coalition were brought to bear against the Baghdad RG Division. The Baghdad RG Division would receive hundreds of sorties over the next few days; most of it focused on artillery, tanks, and ammunition storage points. The Al Kut defenders had the bad fortune of being within a single fuel tank range of a variety of strike aircraft operating from Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf. Without the requirement for external